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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000367

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO (JFELTMAN), NEA/ARP  
(JHARRIS, JBERNDT), NEA/PPD (JDICKMEYER, PAGNEW, DBENZE); R  
(JMCHALE, WDOUGLAS), ECA/A/E (RSWENSON), ECA/A/E/NEA  
(DIVES); DRL; OES/SCT

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TAGS: ECON EDU KPAO LE PGOV PHUM PREL SA SCUL

SUBJECT: THE NEW FACE OF SAUDI ARABIA? SAUDI MINISTER,S  
TOUR D,HORIZON, FROM FACEBOOK TO KINGDOM,S NEW "PRAGMATIC  
HOUSE OF WISDOM"

REF: A. RIYADH 793  
1B. RIYADH 1154  
1C. RIYADH 1278  
1D. JEDDAH 0349  
1E. JEDDAH 0365

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In September 23 meeting with Ambassador Smith and Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale, Saudi Minister of Culture and Information Abdul Aziz Khoja held forth on issues ranging from new media and the significance of the Kingdom's brand-new flagship graduate university to political flashpoints in the Middle East. As in other recent meetings with Mission officers (refs A and B), Khoja was frank and forthcoming in discussing his views of Saudi society, government, education, and relations with the U.S. On the occasion of the official inauguration of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), Khoja described the university as a pragmatic reincarnation of the Islamic House of Wisdom (Bait al-Hikma). Khoja indicated that King Abdullah's vision for KAUST is consistent with his desire to open the kingdom to new ideas and cultures. On regional politics, Khoja averred that the U.S. role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the key to restoring the image of the United States in the region. Asked about the political turmoil in Lebanon, Khoja cited "external influence" as the root cause but paradoxically added that Lebanon cannot solve its problems without help from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Syria. END SUMMARY.

"FACEBOOK" MINISTER: OUTREACH TO YOUTH "ESSENTIAL"

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12. (C) When U/S McHale asked Khoja about his Facebook (FB) page, the minister responded that he had 5,000 friends from all walks of life and many nations, and that his FB page dealt with "everything from...politics to poetry." Khoja emphasized that it is "essential to know what youth are thinking and why," adding that "everyone" in Saudi Arabia has

internet access and thus the whole world via laptop computer at home.

"NEW BEGINNING" AND THE "SPECIAL" U.S.-KSA RELATIONSHIP

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¶3. (C) Citing President Obama's June 4 Cairo speech and the "new beginning" for U.S. relations with the Muslim world, U/S McHale asked Khoja for his views on the U.S. and Arab perceptions of American policies. Stressing the Kingdom's "special" relationship with the U.S. and Saudis' growing understanding of American culture and society, Khoja responded: "We have a lot to do together, and we can do so much together. Saudi Arabia represents the Islamic world to the whole world. We are not isolated, and we want to live with the whole world."

KAUST AS THE MODERN "HOUSE OF WISDOM" AND HARBINGER OF

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EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL PROGRESS IN KSA

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¶4. (C) Turning to education and the historic opening of KAUST on Saudi National Day (ref C), Khoja described the new university as a "pragmatic" reincarnation of the Abbasid-era House of Wisdom (Bait al-Hikma). Asked by Ambassador Smith whether KAUST indicates Saudi Arabia's willingness to reconcile with its pre-Islamic history, Khoja reiterated King Abdullah's vision for KAUST to use science and technology as a bridge between the past and the present, adding that partnering with the United States, the United Kingdom, China, and Japan is necessary to ensure the success of KAUST.

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¶5. (C) Khoja explained that KAUST is consistent with the King's desire to open the Kingdom to new ideas and cultures, promote mixed gender education, and prepare the country to deal with the challenges of the future. With widespread access to new media and social networking tools in Saudi Arabia, the minister acknowledged that it is virtually impossible to control access to information. Instead, the government is now focusing on preparing Saudis for the new world. Khoja opined that the Saudi press has more freedom than any other Gulf country, and that "anyone can write what he wishes." (See ref D for real-world limitations to this claim.)

U.S. MUST SHOW "FLAGS OF DEMOCRACY AND JUSTICE" IN REGION

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¶6. (C) Returning to U/S McHale's request for his views on the U.S. in the region, Khoja emphasized the importance of the U.S. role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the key to restoring the image of United States in the region. Citing Arab anger over perceived U.S. bias toward Israel and attendant double standards in dealing with the Arabs, Khoja said Arabs want to like the U.S. but that the United States must, in turn, be "fair." He described the U.S. as the bearer of "the flags of democracy and justice" and added that Arabs want the United States to apply those principles not just within its borders but everywhere in the world.

LEBANON IS THE "WHOLE WORLD"

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¶7. (C) Ambassador Smith and U/S McHale asked Khoja, the Kingdom's ambassador to Lebanon before being appointed minister, to share his views on that country and the post-election turmoil. Khoja described the situation in Lebanon as "very complicated" and quipped, "Lebanon is the

whole world." The influence of Iran, Syria, and "other countries" is the root of Lebanon's problems. The nation's ongoing political plight and "crazy" factional strife underscored the need for the U.S., Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria to work together to find a solution. Khoja said that while Saudi Arabia would like to assist in stabilizing Lebanon, it does not want to be viewed as interfering in Lebanese politics. He described the contradictory nature of the Lebanese: well educated, cultured, and entrepreneurial, but prone to "acts of savagery" in the blink of an eye. The minister confessed his inability to understand the psychology of the Lebanese, whom he sees as always wanting others to tell them what to do and how to do it. Referring warmly to his relationship with Ambassador Feltman, Khoja recalled: "We were together (in Lebanon) for four years, and we saw a lot of improvements."

BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP IS KEY TO REGIONAL PROGRESS  
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¶8. (C) As the meeting concluded, Khoja re-emphasized the importance of U.S.-Saudi relations not just for bilateral interests but for meeting key, shared regional objectives: stability in Lebanon, a secure and free Iraq, and resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Khoja concluded: "Saudi Arabia can influence the region; the U.S. can influence the world."

¶9. (C) COMMENT: Living up to his reputation as a senior Saudi official open to different ideas, Dr. Khoja had on his coffee table the latest editions of "Rose al-Youssef," an Egyptian magazine often harshly critical of Arab regimes, and "Sayidati," the Kingdom's leading women's magazine. His large library, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, housed a copy of John Mearsheimer/Stephen Walt's "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy" and the complete Great Books series,

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along with his university organic chemistry texts. END  
COMMENT.

¶10. (U) U/S McHale has approved this message.  
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